

This is the lead feature article of the Special Section, Subsection Creating Peace in the World (Subsection Creating Peace in Ourselves comes first)

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The Quaker Alternatives to Violence Project

by Amy Rhett LaMotte

The Quakers, or Religious Society of Friends, have long been known for their deeply held belief in peace as a way of life and for their work to eradicate violence and find peaceful means of resolving conflict. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) having received the Nobel Peace Prize "for humanitarian service, work for reconciliation, and the spirit in which these were carried out."

For the past 25 years, Quakers have been working to eliminate violence on two main fronts: in prisons among those for whom violence has become an ingrained way of life, and in schools to sow seeds of nonviolence and curb the development of violent options. In a program called the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), Quakers and others offer a series of experiential 3-day workshops in which participants learn new ways of thinking about themselves and others and different, nonviolent ways of relating to the conflicts that inevitably arise among us.

Harvard graduate John Christian ended up at the Federal Corrections Facility at Fort Dix in 1991 after he was caught robbing a bank to service his drug addiction. He took his first AVP workshop in 1994—the first year workshops were held in New Jersey. He said in a telephone interview that even now when he runs across another inmate who took that first workshop with him 3 years ago, "There's a bond between us. We have a different attitude toward each other. AVP has a unique ability to build a sense of community within a matter of a couple of hours among convicts of different colors, different ages, different faiths, different backgrounds. It has an almost uncanny ability to help us find that place within ourselves that matches exactly that same place in others. It gets us past all our external differences to our internal similarities. Call it soul or spirit; it's been given many different names, but at this level of common ground we discover that we all hope for the best, we all want to love and be loved. This changes completely the way we relate to each other. And it gives us the ability to change an outcome that looked like it was headed in only one direction."

AVP's power to create community based on the common ground that unites us as humans comes from the Quaker belief that there is good in everybody. "We believe," said Al Thorp, who together with his wife Sue started AVP with Marge Zybas in New Jersey in 1994, "that there is fundamentally something within us that leads toward goodness and that we all seek no matter how conflicted or angry we may be. Deep down there is this strength within—call it spiritual if you wish. In the workshops, we try to help people open up and appreciate that they do have this fundamental goodness."

"AVP doesn't say that these people in prison aren't criminals," Thorp continued, "but it does say you can find good, even though they may have done something horrible. There's still something that you can touch and this program really does that." Sue Thorp explained further, "One of the basic Quaker tenets is a belief that there is a bit of God in everyone, and therefore if you believe that, you're going

to reach for the best in that person and not kill that person. That's really the fundamental basis for the Quaker tradition of working to prevent war and stop violence."

The roots of AVP can be traced back to the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s when a number of Quakers, notably Larry Apsey and Lee Stern, developed the Quaker Project on Community Conflict (QPCC) which provided nonviolent training for crises and potentially violent situations that might arise during protest demonstrations. Their experience in QPCC led Apsey and Stern to address the seeds of violence that they felt became instilled early on in "the patterns of hostile or violent response to human situations learned by young children from adults, older children, or their peers." So together with Priscilla Prutzman and others, they adapted the methods of QPCC to grade school children in New York City in 1972. This program, now widely used in schools throughout the U.S., became known as CCRC or Children's Creative Response to Conflict.

Surprisingly, it was a group of prison inmates in fact who was responsible for the creation of AVP. A group of convicts at Greenhaven Prison in New York who called themselves the Think Tank were involved in educating under-age offenders about the consequences of violent, delinquent activity. However, they found their efforts to "scare them straight" using fear unsuccessful. The Think Tank learned about the work of Stern and Apsey and asked for training in nonviolent conflict resolution skills. In 1975, drawing on their experience both with QPCC and CCRC, Apsey and others developed a program for use with prisoners and later formed AVP, a private, nonprofit educational corporation funded entirely by private sources. Though a Quaker-inspired program, it is not sectarian and draws both participants and facilitators from a diversity of backgrounds.

AVP was very well-received in New York State, and workshops are now held throughout the state prison system. As a measure of AVP's success in New York, Marge Zybas, who had been involved in AVP since its inception, used to relate that for the first annual dinner that they held for prisoners who had taken AVP workshops, 50 men gathered in a gymnasium lined with armed guards. Ten years later, over 200 men crowded into that same gymnasium supervised by only one, unarmed guard. AVP workshops are now held in 44 states and 20 countries, including Ireland, Russia, and India. Toby Riley, who runs workshops in Spanish at Fort Dix, will be initiating AVP workshops in Nicaragua this fall.

Everyone interviewed for this article spoke highly of Zybas who died of cancer last spring. When she "retired" to Medford, New Jersey, she almost immediately began working to get AVP started in New Jersey prisons. She met Al and Sue Thorp, who had been involved in starting AVP in Dayton, Ohio, where they lived before moving to New Jersey. Together they started holding AVP workshops in 1994 in the community in order to build up a pool of facilitators to run workshops in area prisons. That same year, they began running workshops at Fort Dix and the Garden State Youth Correctional Facility at Yardville.

"We used to joke," said Tom Truitt, who's been involved in AVP since its inception here in New Jersey, "that if Marge was ever in trouble with the law, she could plead for 5 years off because of all the time she had already spent in prison facilitating workshops. She was a great inspiration to us all and widely loved by everyone, including the inmates. When she first developed cancer, she received calls and letters from inmates all over the world. She always told women who inquired about the

program that never in her 24 years of involvement in AVP did she ever feel in jeopardy. It was always a very positive experience, and that's what we all find, it's just always a joyful experience."

Though the focus of AVP was first on prisoners, in the 1980s it was adapted for use in schools where it sometimes goes under the name RAVE (Real Alternatives to Violence for Everyone) or HIP (Help Increase the Peace) to distinguish it from the prison program. The AFSC began conducting AVP workshops in Syracuse schools in 1991 under the name HIP. This program was so popular, it has now been introduced in 16 cities around the country.

Here in New Jersey, Zybas was also instrumental in starting AVP in area schools with the help of Chris Dvorak, who initiated and coordinates AVP workshops at Sterling High School in Camden and Truitt, who now co-coordinates workshops for students at the Burlington Meeting House Conference Center with the Rev. Robert Moore of the Coalition for Peace Action in Princeton, which has helped fund most of the project through its Peace Action Education Fund. These workshops are known as HIP/RAVE because here in New Jersey, the RAVE program has joined the HIP network in a cooperative venture.

Working with Zybas in 1991, Truitt found it difficult to run workshops for junior and high school students who all knew each other very well, had all grown up in the same neighborhood, and "had each developed a certain persona that was hard for them to let go of in front of their friends." To achieve greater diversity, he and Moore began holding workshops for students drawn from public and private high schools in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania at the Burlington Meeting House last January.

AVP consists of two intensive 3-day workshops, a basic and an advanced; for those who wish to become facilitators, there is a third workshop called Training for Facilitators. Ideally, there are three to four facilitators for each workshop of about 20 participants. AVP encourages a mix of different ages, racial backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, and faiths. It is partly through this diverse mix of people that AVP works its magic. For workshops held in prisons, two facilitators are inmates and some of the participants come from the outside community. In workshops geared for students, the team of facilitators includes two students and again, participants include people from the community at large.

Dvorak emphasized how this diversity helps young people and adults better appreciate one another. "In the first workshop we ran," she recalled, "there was a member of the school board who was nearly 80. Arthritis had crippled him and made it very hard for him to speak and move. At first the kids laughed at him. However, they learned he had been a head surgeon and came to appreciate the excellent feedback he gave and saw how he still participated as much as he could. Kids who'd never known a grandparent really learned to have respect for older people through that experience. They also come to appreciate their peers. The first day, they often don't even like each other, but I remember one student saying to another on the third day, 'I just met you in the hall the other day, but I didn't think you were such a nice person.' And they realize that this might be true of the rest of the world too."

"AVP is a model that allows students to feel they are peers with the adult participants," continued Dvorak, "and that gives teachers an insight into students they didn't have before. It's also great

having kids as facilitators. Nothing reaches kids better than having fellow students extolling AVP ideas." Rev. Bob Moore concurred. "When we were reviewing programs to fund, we liked AVP because it empowers youth to be leaders. It makes them part of the solution."

Also central to AVP's success is the fact that it is an all-volunteer organization; the facilitators receive no money for running workshops and participants must take the program voluntarily. "This is what makes us credible," explained Truitt. "AVP would never have grown to be the organization it is today not only here but throughout the world without this aspect. Who would do this on a voluntary basis if they didn't have a genuine, personal concern? It is central to building trust among inmates especially. Virtually anyone can become a facilitator, if they're willing and able to volunteer."

"Though we cooperate with prison administrations," continued Truitt, "we're very independent in the sense that we're not there to serve their interests. We insist that the parole board and administration not use the workshops as a quid pro quo or reward mechanism. I had a case once where a parole board had turned an inmate down and stipulated that he take the workshop. When he did he was fuming mad and almost destroyed the workshop because he felt he was having to serve another 9 months just because he hadn't taken it in the first place. We also insist on total confidentiality; there are no guards or listening devices in the room."

Another aspect of the program that distinguishes it from other conflict resolution programs is the idea of transforming power-the power of nonviolent action. Steve Angell, a social worker who Larry Apsey recruited to help start AVP at Greenhaven, explained, "It is the core concept of AVP and everything we do relates to it in some way. We all have the capacity to change a potentially violent situation into a peaceful situation. The purpose of the workshops is to see how we can open ourselves to it and let it work in our lives."

The workshops are designed to increase awareness of the ways in which we block off this capacity, continued Angell. "One of the major ways this capacity is blocked is by not affirming ourselves and thinking negatively of ourselves. Other blocks include being judgmental and blaming one another. Even wars have blame as their basis. So in the basic workshop, we try to cover the fundamental ideas-affirming ourselves and one another, engendering better communication and listening skills, building community, learning to cooperate, achieving consensus-in fact, conflict resolution skills come last and are built on all these other aspects."

The basic workshop begins with affirmation exercises that build self-esteem and respect for self and others. In every basic workshop, participants come up with a positive, descriptive adjective that begins with the same letter as the first letter of their names. "So we might have Able Al, Merciful Marge, Amiable Amy, Gorgeous George-the men love to come up with outrageous names," said Al Thorp. And these names are then used throughout the workshop. Another typical exercise involves breaking into pairs and talking about oneself with one's partner using only positive attributes. "No put downs are allowed," explained Sue Thorp. "You can't even say, 'I'm a good cook, but I can't make gravy.' If anyone puts themselves or another person down, others will say 'Ouch!'"

Early on in the basic workshop, participants engage in exercises to help them learn better communications skills. "Our most powerful cause of conflict is the way we communicate," said Marilyn Williams, a former high school science teacher who is now pursuing an MA in conflict

resolution and coordinates the AVP workshops at Yardville. "And it is also the most powerful way we have to resolve conflict. So we do a lot of exercises in communications skills to help people look at how to solve conflicts in a different way, help them take a different perspective and realize that one's own point of view isn't the only one. You can say some pretty powerful things to people if you know how to say it in the right way."

In a series of exercises, participants experience being listened to attentively and what it's like to talk to someone who's not interested in what they are saying. They learn that they may hear what a person says, but not necessarily what they mean. And they learn how to communicate more effectively, without being aggressive or passive, using "I" messages. "The 'I' messages are not new to many, but they are very powerful ways of approaching others in a conflict," explained Al Thorp. The typical formula is: I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when people \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_. But as Thorp pointed out, "We found that 'I' messages not only transform the other person, but the important part is that they transforms you; they change your attitude. If you put yourself in that frame of mind, you don't really need to use the formula."

Many of these exercises also build community as participants share and find that they have many feelings, aspirations, and problems in common. A sense of community is also built by the exercises in cooperation. A typical exercise involves having the participants break into smaller groups of four or five to construct an object out of tinkertoys in complete silence. Among the students, a favorite is the egg drop exercise, said Truitt. Participants form groups and using only 8 plastic straws and 6 inches of tape, each group has to construct a device that allows them to drop a raw egg from a height of 8 feet without breaking it.

In all of these exercises, participants learn by doing. "Rather than lecture on anything," said Truitt, "we give them an exercise." As Williams noted, "We do the exercise first and then elicit responses from the participants. When you allow that process to happen, they come up with the answers as a result of the experiential learning that they went through with the exercise." Even on the subject of violence, participants are not told what violence is, but are encouraged to brainstorm. Inevitably, they come up with many more acts of violence than our usual conceptions. They realize that violence is not just physical, but can also occur when someone shuns or ignores another or puts someone down. They also brainstorm about the sources of violence and start putting things together in their own way, as the result of their own experience in the workshop.

Facilitators join in the workshop as equals. Together with the participants, they sit in a circle. "The facilitators don't all sit together, because it would look like we're ganging up and here we are and there the inmates are," explained Al Thorp. "We also don't stand, or talk down, or even suggest we are teachers." Truitt concurred. "We simply lead you through a learning process. There are no lectures, tests, or homework. We're there to empower you as a participant to grow and to experience what it means to be close to other people. Though it's a personal growth experience that we offer, it's not therapy and it's very different from an educational model. Rather, it empowers the participation of students and allows them to feel they are peers with the adult participants. With inmates, you get a group of men who for 10 years have never said anything significant to people they see every day and by the second day of the basic workshop, they are laughing and hugging and sharing deep feelings. The sense of community that is built in 2-1/2 days is absolutely beyond belief."

Throughout the workshops when facilitators find a need to change the pace, they utilize a number of "light and lively" exercises or "ice breakers." A favorite is pattern ball, in which the group learns to juggle as many as a dozen balls at once. Besides helping to lighten the atmosphere after a more intense session, these exercises build bonds and community among the participants and provide very welcome moments of fun for the inmates, especially. "The biggest problem in prison," said Christian, "is keeping hope alive. I have a release date; I'll get out of here in the year 2000. But many men will never leave here until after they die and for them, maintaining hope is the hardest thing. AVP really helps with that."

In the life-threatening situations that come up in prison, Christian said he has often drawn on AVP's positive communications skills. "Learning to understand where people are coming from, learning to attack the problem, not the person-these have been invaluable skills." He also noted that almost 10 percent of the prison population of nearly 3,000 men at Fort Dix has now taken an AVP workshop. "You can really notice a difference on the compound," said Christian, who has facilitated workshops for almost 3 years. "Once you know a person, it is not so easy to discount him as an individual. One of the great things about AVP is that once you develop some insight, you really can't go back."

Magnolia McGlothen, a special education teacher at Trenton Central High who plans to become a facilitator, also values the communications skills she learned. "I have really been able to use them in my work and my personal life," she said. "The communications skills and how the workshop affirmed who I am-these two aspects really reached out and grabbed me. And everything you learn, you internalize. It's not something you'll forget. You actually learn it and it becomes a part of you. In a tough situation, you can reach back and use what you've learned."

"As a teacher, I mediate all the time and this training definitely helps," McGlothen continued. "Often we hear one thing, but a person was saying something else and it really helps to affirm back to them what we think they meant. This really helps. The best exercises though were the ice breakers. My favorite was called Crocodile and Frogs. One person is the crocodile who circles around the frogs who sit on lily pads (pieces of newspaper). Everyone becomes concerned not only with saving themselves, but with saving the whole group and that's what the workshop was all about-learning to care about yourself and others."

All of these exercises build toward the third day of the basic workshop when participants put the skills they've learned into practice by role playing conflict situations drawn from their own lives-butting in chow line or discovering a boyfriend has been unfaithful. Before doing the role plays, participants are given one hand-out-the 12 Guides to Transforming Power (see sidebar). Truitt explained that these are a set of "guidelines about how we can reach out to that goodness in others to reverse or transform a potentially violent or negative situation into a peaceful, positive one. They embody the philosophical foundation of the AVP program."

In giving these guidelines, the facilitators often relate anecdotes -true stories of instances when people were able to draw on their inner power. They often tell the story of a woman in New York City who was returning home from the library one night carrying a heavy load of books in her arms. She became aware of someone following her and when she stopped at a crosswalk, a large man approached her to hold her up. In a flash of inspiration, she turned to the man and said, "We New Yorkers get such a bad rap for violence. I'm so glad you came along. My arms are aching from

carrying these books. Won't you carry them for me?" And she dumped the whole load into his arms. To his surprise, he took them. They walked together to the door of her apartment and she then held out her arms for the books, saying, "Thank you so much for helping me." He said as he left, "You know Lady, that wasn't what I had in mind." Not only did she avoid being mugged, but she "enabled him to be the more considerate, caring person that he could be."

"The power within that is capable of transforming potentially dangerous or violent situations into nonviolent ones is there," said Williams. "It's always there. It's not something we can use or manipulate, but if we are open to it, we can allow it to work through us."

Williams experienced this "transforming power" herself one day when she took a friend to the grocery store. "As I waited for my friend, I noticed a big commotion going on at the other end of the parking lot. I could see a man and a woman holding a baby. They were really going at it verbally, so people were standing around watching. In the meantime my friend came out and after I helped her put the groceries in the car, I got in the car. Then-I don't know what made me do it, but all of a sudden I got out of the car and started to walk toward them. As I got closer, I looked at some of the men standing around to try to get them to come in because basically I'm a chicken at heart, but nobody would move, so I just kept on. When I reached them, my inner sense told me that I could reason with him, but not with her. So I got in the middle of them and put my hands up. He never looked at me, but I kept looking at him and saying, 'You don't want to do this in front of this baby.' Finally, he just turned around and walked away."

"What was strange for me was not that I did it," continued Williams, "although that was strange for me-to interfere with people I don't know. But what was really strange is that I didn't feel like I walked over there on my own will. You know how in many of his movies, Spike Lee has scenes where a person appears to be gliding down the street? That's the way it felt to me. It was not on my own accord. And the other thing that was strange was that when I got back in my car, I noted that I had been perfectly calm through the whole thing and normally, my heart would have been racing. I really don't feel that I can take credit for whatever happened that day. I've had only one experience like that, but after it was over, I knew deep down in my soul that that's what had happened."

As Steve Angell said, "Transforming power is not something that anyone gives to us. It is part of our being. It uses us, we don't use it. These workshops are about changing ourselves, not changing others. They are about self-transformation. That is why the only criteria to participate in one, is the willingness to volunteer."

Tinca Palmer, now a student facilitator, took her first workshop 3 years ago as a junior at Trenton Central High. "I was a little hesitant at first, because I didn't really know what it was about, but once I found out I really liked it. Before the workshop, I had a bad temper and got mad easily," explained Palmer. "The workshop helped me learn to stop and take a look inside and consider different avenues that I could take. It has helped me think before I react. Violence isn't the answer-it just creates more problems. That's really what the workshops are about-learning to think before we react." Palmer became a facilitator because she thought, "If AVP helped me, it could help others too. I wouldn't be doing the workshops if they didn't help. Other people would detect that. People know if you're being phony."

Anthony Smith took his first workshop as an eighth grader at the Arthur J. Holland Middle School in Trenton because he was concerned about the "violent activities" he saw in the inner city and at school. Like Christian, he loved the feeling of unity and togetherness that the workshop created among people of diverse ages and backgrounds. He said that AVP helped him recently with a friend who played a prank throwing eggs at people's houses in his neighborhood. One egg hit his mother's car. Smith was able to confront his friend without getting into a fight. "Before the workshop, I definitely would have gotten into a fight, but I said this is not worth fighting about. My friend just walked away."

As the eldest of three children, Smith said AVP also helps him when his younger siblings start fighting. "When they get into an argument over some simple thing, I make them give each other a hug and say I love you. And they do."

For more information concerning AVP, to attend or organize a workshop, contact New Jersey Council, Alternatives to Violence Project, P.O. Box 1391, Medford, NJ 08055-1391, or call Al Thorp at 609-953-7647, or Tom Truitt at 908-359-8363, or Marjorie Kerr at the AVP/USA National Office, P.O. Box 300431, Houston, TX, 713-747-9999.